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News focus

Fears mount over 'fortress' America

As the US tightens its grip on visa applications post 9/11 and restricts some areas of biomedical research, universities are increasingly worried they may lose their pre-eminent role in attracting foreign students and scientists. **Nigel Williams** reports.

'It's torture getting into America', ran a headline earlier this month in a British newspaper. Although dealing with problems faced by tourists, America's tightening grip on visa and passport requirements and other policy decisions, are having far-reaching consequences. The author of the newspaper article described how a fellow journalist had recently

been handcuffed, interrogated, held in a cell and maltreated by American security staff. This was as a result of landing at Los Angeles International Airport for a brief stay with the incorrect type of visa.

With imminent laws insisting that all new passports contain biometric data such as fingerprints and iris scans, worse appears on

the way. Many travellers are also desperately hoping Congress will grant a delay to the current deadline of October to help avert chaos as countries try to introduce the new passports. People will soon have to queue to have photos taken and be fingerprinted — the kind of procedure most countries reserve for their criminals. It is not surprising that such prospects and news stories are causing some students and researchers to rethink their foreign study plans in the US.



Dark shadows: Researchers and university administrators are increasingly worried that policies on visas and biomedical research from the US government are causing the best foreign students and researchers to look elsewhere for their studies, threatening the global attractiveness of the major US universities. (Photograph: Associated Press.)

Since Britain first coined the phrase, 'brain drain' has usually referred to an exodus of the best and brightest from the rest of the world to the US. But US pundits have recently raised the spectre of a reverse brain drain. The fear has been fuelled in part also by the threat of ideological restrictions on biomedical research.

There is concern among the universities that shrinking international graduate student intake affecting all disciplines is one result. A February poll of 250 US universities found that 47 per cent had seen a decline in overseas postgraduate applications for 2004–5. And the number of visa applications flagged for review has risen from 1,000 in 2000 to 14,000 in 2002.

Proposals to add so-called student visa violators to the National Crime Information Center database also cause concern. Would you study in another country if you knew you could end up in a criminal database alongside convicted sex offenders for the rest of your life for an innocent mistake of technical infraction, asks Victor Johnson of the Association of International Educators in a recent speech. "I can't think of a quicker way to halt educational exchange in its tracks," he said.

Many fear that students will either stay at home or apply to universities in other English-speaking countries. "We appear to be seeing the beginnings of a shift in the attitudes of people around the world towards studying in the US," says Johnson. Students and scholars in fields deemed sensitive to US national security face more scrutiny and an average 67-day delay in obtaining visas, that has led to some conferences being cancelled.

Writing in the *Washington Monthly*, Richard Florida, of Carnegie Mellon University called the change in policy towards international students worrying. "For the first time in our history, we're saying to highly mobile, finicky global talent: 'You don't belong here'."

In the British press earlier this month, Philip Altbach, director of

the Center for International Education at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, also highlighted the shift in trend in applications by foreign students to the US. "For the first time in decades, the number of international students in the US this year has not grown — remaining virtually stagnant at 586,000. The immediate future looks bleak. Numbers taking the graduate record examination are down - by 50 per cent in China, 37 per cent in India, 15 per cent in South Korea and 43 per cent in Taiwan. These countries are among the largest senders of students to the US," he says. Many universities have seen foreign applications fall. "Princeton University reported a 50 per cent decline in Chinese applications and a decline of 28 per cent in overall foreign applications. Michigan, Syracuse, Duke, Georgetown and many other universities also noted steep declines. Fewer applications mean fewer enrolments," he says.

He believes that concern about security, the Patriot Act and other restrictions have created profound changes in attitudes and perceptions within the US and abroad. "Many tales of difficulties experienced by students and scholars in obtaining visas, the perceived disrespect for visa applicants shown at US embassies and delays inherent in the entire immigration system have been significant deterrents," he says.

While foreign students say they feel reasonably safe and have few complaints once inside the US, those thinking about studying there express fear about their safety, according to a recent survey prepared by the company JWT Specialised Communications.

The newspaper *USA Today* pondered in February whether there could be a 'significant shift in the world's balance of brain-power'. And *Business Week* magazine warned in March of a 'worldwide technology race' developing as countries emulate 'the US system of innovation' and as 'brilliant researchers steer clear of the US'.

Sweden's Karolinska Institute, borrowing from the US model, has tapped private benefactors and is working with institutions such as Leiden University and Cambridge University to form the League of European Universities to wield more clout. Cambridge University announced plans this month for major expansion in a city with one of Europe's fastest growing hi-tech industrial bases.

The first rumblings of a reverse brain drain in academia came with the defection of leading stem-cell researcher Roger Pedersen from the University of California, San Francisco, to Cambridge University in 2001.

Pedersen moved amid escalating public funding restrictions on embryonic stem-cell research that had forced him out of his campus laboratory. Meanwhile, the White House has also forbidden all forms of human cloning, including therapeutic cloning used to create embryonic stem cells, overriding a warning from 40 Nobel laureates that the blanket ban would have 'a chilling effect on all scientific research in the US'.

Another high-level developmental biologist, Juan Carlos Izpisua Belmonte, from California's Salk Institute, is leaving to head a new \$45 million Research Centre for Regenerative Medicine in Barcelona. Forty stem-cell researchers will work in the centre on the city's beachfront. The new socialist government is likely to give more encouragement to stem-cell research.

"If US universities are to maintain their quality and influence, they must continue to attract top-quality students and scholars from abroad. The sign of scientific power is the attractiveness of the university to people worldwide. If the present barriers are allowed to remain, the US will see a decline in the quality and the influence of its universities — and this will have lasting implications for the economy, for science and research, and for America's role in the world," says Altbach.